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The Future of Ireland's Neutrality and Security

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The Future of Ireland's Neutrality and Security

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Uneven development

The future for Ireland's conventional defence forces and defence and security policy appears set to follow a peculiarly asymmetrical trajectory. On the one hand, Ireland's skies, land mass and territorial waters lack even the most basic defensive military oversight or protection. On the other hand, in a process that has denied Irish citizens a healthy debate on military neutrality, Ireland's Defence Forces are being integrated by stealth into the EU's newly-created military structures.

Ireland's defence forces are being integrated into an EU with grand military ambitions. According to the EU St. Malo Declaration of 1998, this grand design involves Europe acquiring the capability to launch 'autonomous' military operations with 'credible military forces' for actions within and without Europe's borders. Ireland's second Nice referendum in October of 2002 formalised Europe's newly formed EU Military Committee and EU Military Staffs - reporting to the European Council in Brussels.

This new EU military headquarters - the command and control centre for the European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF) - has among its staff, five senior Irish army officers. These officers, members of what is in effect the ERRF's general staff, play a vital role in directing and coordinating the development of a European force of over 100,000 troops with over 500 ships and aircraft capable of operating within the EU or up to 2,500 miles beyond its borders.

This important development comes at a time of rapid change for the Defence Forces. Over the last 10 years or so, Ireland's army has gone from being a 'stand-alone' military entity to one with membership of many military groupings including NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) alliance. During this period the Irish government has also formally pledged almost a thousand Irish troops - infantry and Special Forces - for service with the ERRF. In November the Dail approved Irish soldiers for service with the EU's new Battle Groups. As I write, Irish troops are serving as part of a Finnish NATO Battle Group deployed in Kosovo, and yet more are being committed to EUFOR, the EU military mission to the former Yugoslavia which - in an historic development - is replacing NATO's SFOR.

These momentous developments are taking place in an environment of almost no public debate. In many respects, the Irish public has practically sleep-walked its way through the most fundamental reshaping of Europe's balance of military power since the end of the Second World War.

This is in part due to the fact that our military - unlike our American and European counterparts - do not contribute proactively to our collective understanding of security and defence issues. Unlike our European neighbours, the Irish military - contrary to best practice in the international military community - do not publish articles in international military or academic journals, let alone the print or electronic media. Our information on military matters in Ireland is confined to a narrow range of sources including a small number of academics and journalists along with an even smaller number of civil servants and politicians - some of whom are woefully misinformed.

As a result, the Defence Forces of today is seriously under-strength, ill-equipped to meet day to day security tasks and suffers from poor morale. Meanwhile, its primary asset, its human resource consisting of officers who have honed their skills in difficult circumstances are being headhunted to the Military Staffs of the ERRF. Consistent

with a pattern of under-funding at home and exploitation abroad, the Defence Forces will continue to be absorbed into European military structures whilst our domestic defences remain under-developed. This process seems set to continue in a climate of political obfuscation and public indifference.

In this climate, without 'joined up thinking' – an explicit defence strategy - our territory and its citizens remain particularly vulnerable to the man-made and natural disasters that inevitably lie ahead.

Dr. Tom Clonan is a retired army officer. He lectures in the School of Media DIT.